



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on the Current Situation in Georgia

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
September 7, 2006

Thank you, Mr. Chairman,

The United States expresses its most serious concern about the incident on Sunday, September 3, in which an official helicopter carrying the Georgian Minister of Defense came under fire from an area controlled by the JPKF. He was forced to make an emergency landing near Georgia's South Ossetia region.

An OSCE spot report, issued earlier this week, points out that flights from Tbilisi to western Georgia use routinely the same air traffic corridor where Defense Minister Okruashvili's helicopter came under attack. I hasten to add that this is also the flight path used recently by two delegations of United States Senators, as well as other foreign dignitaries visiting Georgia, including those from our own OSCE countries. In fact, a missile was reportedly fired at a Georgian support helicopter just last week as it flew to meet up with the delegation of United States Senator John McCain.

Mr. Chairman, the shots fired last Sunday at the Georgian helicopter -- allegedly from the direction of the Ossetian-administered village of Issakau -- constitute a criminal act. Despite a provision in an annex to a 2002 JCC Protocol that characterizes "unauthorized flights" over the JPKF area of responsibility as "dangerous actions", there has been no discussion about what constitutes an authorized or unauthorized flight.

As Ambassador Reeve points out in his spot report, the JPKF has no air traffic control capability and no air movement coordination cell in its structure. The Government of Georgia clearly has a right to traverse its own air space on a well-traveled route linking Tbilisi with western Georgia. The United States unequivocally condemns the attack.

The U.S. also condemns a press statement by South Ossetian de facto "defense minister" Anatoliy Barankevich, as reported in the OSCE spot report, declaring that South Ossetian armed forces would "shoot down all aircraft that have violated South Ossetian airspace." This is the second such statement made by South Ossetian de facto authorities, the first occurring last February, coincidentally, just as I got off the plane in Tbilisi. We point out that South Ossetia is a region of Georgia and that it has neither sovereign territory nor air space to defend. We condemn Mr. Barankevich's completely irresponsible statements.

We urge the South Ossetian de facto authorities to work to build confidence, rather than greater mistrust, between the sides. This should begin with the implementation by the South Ossetian side of the demilitarization measures presented last spring to de facto president Kokoity by the Ambassadors to Georgia of the United States, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Russia, together with Ambassador Reeve.

Mr. Chairman, we believe this most recent incident once again raises the question about the ability of the JPKF, as currently configured, to carry out its peacekeeping mandate in Georgia's South Ossetia region. The OSCE spot report highlights an incident in which the JPKF Chief of Staff obstructed the work of a joint JPKF/OSCE observer mission by ordering his own Russian JPKF military observer to ignore OSCE requests to examine a piece of field artillery they spotted along their route.

Such an order raises questions about the ability, and even willingness, of JPKF peacekeepers to fulfill their mandate. Meanwhile, South Ossetian militia posts are being strengthened. OSCE observers have seen several unidentified armed men in camouflage. And tracer bullets were recently fired across the path of joint JPKF/OSCE monitoring teams by local militia members.

The United States commends the Georgian authorities for their restraint. This most recent incident underscores in the clearest way the need to pursue urgently what the United States and many others have advocated for some time now: the pursuit of a peaceful settlement of the conflict in Georgia's South Ossetia region according to the peace plan endorsed at the 2005 OSCE Ministerial in Ljubljana. Several countries represented in this room today made important financial contributions to that process earlier this year at the OSCE Donors' Conference for South Ossetia.

In a Food for Thought paper circulated in July, the United States suggested further concrete steps to move the parties toward peace, namely: increasing the number of OSCE monitors in the South Ossetia region and expanding their mandate; establishing a JPKF/OSCE checkpoint at Didi Gupta; and arranging joint permanent monitoring of the Roki Tunnel by Georgia, Russia, and the OSCE.

We hope that these measures can be implemented as soon as possible, so that we can put behind us the speculations, accusations, and recriminations that arise from lawless acts of violence like the helicopter shooting incident we condemn today.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.